'*To thrive, one must wive*?'[1] The subsistence strategies of unmarried women in the rural Franc of Bruges during the 18th and early 19th centuries

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Introduction. Women and work in historical perspective

Debates about women's work in the early modern era polarize around two groups of researchers. The first group concludes that during this period the economic position of women deteriorated because of the rise of capitalism and later also industrialisation. Women were gradually pushed into the domestic sphere and occupational opportunities declined, especially in the formal economy. According to these researchers, society became more and more patriarchal. (A. Clark, 1919; L. Tilly and J. Scott, 1978; M. Wiesner, 1986 and M. Howell, 1986). A second group, however, opposes these assertions and states that women were in general employed in badly paid jobs. These historians – among others, J. Bennett (1988), O. Hufton (1997) and P. Earl (1998) – state that European society had been always a patriarchal one wherein occupations were gender divided. Finally, a.o., P. Sharpe (1998) and S. Ogilvie (2003) provide a new perspective to this debate. They point to marital status, age and social class as important factors of differentiation in women's work. Social background, for example, seems to have been either an important obstacle or an opportunity for unmarried women. According to B. Hill, '*(…) if there were certain things all spinsters had in common there was a divide – if not always that clear – between middle- and labouring-class spinsters*'. (Hill, 2001: 176). Ogilvie (2003) furthermore acknowledges the political and institutional environment as an important factor of influence. In Germany, she states, the weakness of governmental power and the strength of the guilds excluded women from the formal economy and made them powerless.

The fact that women were important contributors to the family economy is by now largely accepted (a.o. Hufton, 1997). M. Everard (2005) even concludes for the Northern Netherlands that, before the end of the 19th century, it was impossible for a family to survive without the income of women. It is unclear, however, whether and if many women had work opportunities outside the family economy and could develop independent economic activities. The work of E. Van Nederveen Meerkerk, for instance, indicates that the labour participation of unmarried women was very high. (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2007). Is this high participation rate an indication of a decent life-style or of mere survival? If families could not survive without women's contributions, how could single women with low income survive?

The goal of this paper is to explore the coping strategies of these single women. In particular, I will look at their economic activities (occupation), housing situations (co-residence) and migration. I will investigate two rural areas in particular, one area with supposed favorable living circumstances for women (cottage industry) and another in which their opportunities were less favorable (commercial farming). In this paper I will start by a short overview of the literature on employment of unmarried women in the early modern period. Secondly, I will describe the rural environment under study and

[1] Peters, 1997: 326

[2] This paper reports some preliminary findings of my doctoral dissertation on never married women in the region of Bruges. My Ph.D project is funded by the Research Fund of Ghent University (BOF) and aims to analyze the strategies that never married women employed to secure their survival in different social agrosystems during the 18th century.

the sources used in this paper. Thirdly, I will present the results on the occupations, the household situations and migration of single women in the two areas around 1748 and 1814. The paper concludes with a comparison between the two areas and assesses to what extent the economic structure of the area was beneficial for unmarried women.

1. Occupations of unmarried women

1.1. Unmarried women in early modern cities

Research on unmarried women in the early modern period and the early 19th century concludes that the economic position of urban single females was in general unfavourable. In fact, B. Hill writes, working as a servant was the only occupation for single women that was largely accepted. (Hill, 2001). Their social background, furthermore, delimited opportunities. Single women from labouring classes, for example, were excluded from manufactories, except for badly paid and marginal tasks. Single women without a job were sometimes involved in petty larceny or prostitution. Middle-class women, as a result of the 'gentility mentality' of the middle classes, had other occupational restrictions. The only job for them that was acceptable was as a teacher, a governess or as lady's companion. Despite these restrictions and other legal boundaries, a surprisingly large group of single women ended up as successful businesswomen. By 1750 almost 20% of all traders in Southampton were female and 15 to 20% of them were single women. (Hill, 2001, 52). M. Wiesner (1999) states that German women – although officially excluded – sometimes even produced or traded for the guilds. A. Froide (2005) draws similar conclusions in her study on never married women in early modern England. Because of the lesser importance of the English guilds, unmarried women were allowed to participate in an increasing number of economic activities. Moreover, according to S.D. Smith '*For urban families with unmarried daughters (including fatherless households) guild training and membership were viewed as employment options worth the payment of premiums'*. (Smith, 2005: 122). Some never married women even operated as credit lenders or as merchants.

1.2. Rural unmarried women

Research on rural early modern unmarried women is less abundant. M. Wiesner (1999) concludes that in the German countryside unmarried women mostly performed agricultural work or were involved in the textile industry (spinning). According to P. Sharpe unmarried women were in the course of the 18th century increasingly involved in the cottage textile industry which stimulated the independence of single women. (Sharpe, 1991) In the Nordic countryside, the economic activities of single women were more restricted. (Möring, 2003) B. Hill (2001) comes to the same conclusion for the English case. During the 18th century it became increasingly difficult for unmarried women to operate on an independent basis in regions with commercial farming and where common land disappeared. Moreover, the increasing birth rates and declining child mortality, increased the amount of young adolescents on the labour market from the middle of the 18th century which decreased job security for these young unmarried women (and men) in agricultural labour.

1.3. Unmarried women in the Southern Netherlands

Research related to women's work in the early modern Southern Netherlands has been done by L. Van Aert[3]. In her study on trade, and retail trade in specific, she examines the occupations of women in the

[3] For the Northern Netherlands, recent research by A. Schmidt (widows, 2001), D. van den Heuvel (female traders focussing on the not-so-well-to-do women, 2007), E. van Nederveen Meerkerk (women and wage work, 2007), M. van der Heijden (seamen's wives and married female traders, 2006) and M. van Dekken (female

city of Antwerp. The female labour participation was indeed high – between 68.5% and 80.5% –, and higher than in Germany and the Republic. (Van Aert, 2008) These high levels indicate, according to her, that women needed to work in order to survive. The Antwerp women were active in a surprising variety of occupations, and marital status appeared as an important factor of distinction. Unmarried women were less active in the food and catering industry (Van Aert 2008, Blondé 1999), and furthermore did not participate in the art crafts, transportation and industry (except for the textile industry). Guild restrictions even prohibited unmarried women from certain professions, except for independent working women who could become a member of the mercers' guilds. At the end of the 18th century, 20% of their new members were females. (Van Aert and Van Damme 2005) Widows, on the contrary, were working in food production, the catering industry and manufacturing. (Van Aert 2005) For the city of Bruges, K. Verstappen (1984) found that most of the unmarried women worked as servants, while another large group worked as spinsters or seamstresses.

Research on occupations of rural unmarried women in early modern Flanders is not elaborately done yet, except for T. Lambrecht (2000 & 2001) and V. Delahaye (2006), who studied rural domestic servants (both male and female). These domestic servants, however, were mostly adolescent or in their twenties and married afterwards. R. Vermoesen focussed on rural women involved in the cottage industry. He, however, only based his research on probate inventories, and so excluded most of the unmarried women. (Vermoesen 2006, p. 294)

2. Unmarried women in the Franc of Bruges in the 18th and early 19th centuries: context and sources

During the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century an increasing number of women remained unmarried. According to calculations by C.Vandenbroeke (1984) the average age of women at first marriage in Flanders rose from 25.3 years at the beginning of the 18th century to 27.5 at the end. In the first half of the 19th century, the age of marriage increased to 29.7 years. Not only were more people temporarily unmarried, more people remained unmarried for their entire lives. At the census of 1796, 28% of the women at age 30-35 were single; during the crisis of the 1840s, this figure had increased to 54%. The percentage of women above age 50 who never married increased from 15% in the early 18th century to 21% at the turn of the century. (Devos 1999; 105)

This West-European marriage pattern, together with high urbanisation, economic specialisation and early proletarianization were, according to Schmidt, Van der Heijden and Wall (2007) distinctive factors for the occupational opportunities of women in the Southern Netherlands, which early created wage labour. Moreover, in the Franc of Bruges – as part of the County of Flanders –, unmarried women enjoyed legal advantages compared to other women. Firstly, unmarried women and widows above the age of 25 had full legal capacity. As a consequence they could manage their own finances and run their own businesses. (Gillisen 1962; Heirbaut 2005) Secondly, women had the same inheritance rights as males. This could provide them with additional income and diminish the pressure to get married at a young age.

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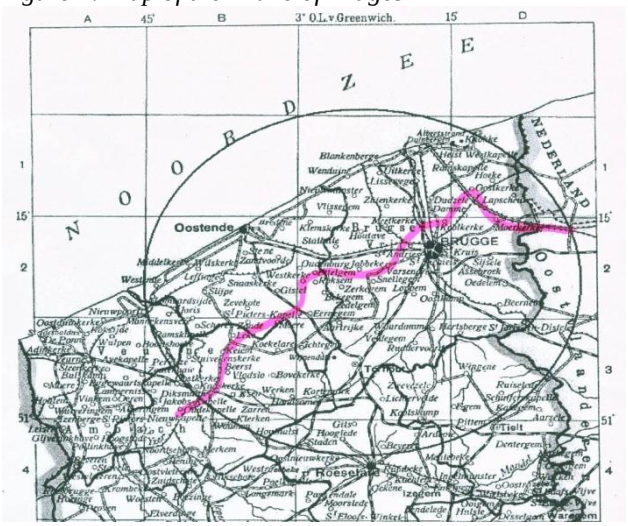
brewers, 2003) focuses both on the importance of women's work as well as on the differences between women (single vs. married) in the early modern period.

Figure 1: Map of the Franc of Bruges



In this paper, I start from the concept of 'social agrosystem' – developed by E.Thoen (2004) – to unravel the possible differences in the opportunities for single women. In fact, two quite different social agrosystems can be distinguished within the rural Franc of Bruges, in particular that of the coastal area (the so-called Polders) and that of the inland area. The city of Bruges provides the demarcation between the two areas (see figure 1). I assume that the two sub-areas implied different living circumstances for unmarried women.

The Polder region (north of the city of Bruges) with fertile soils composed of marine clays, distinguished itself as a rich agricultural area with large holdings and commercially oriented farms. In this coastal area, polarization during the early modern period created a growing class of full-time and resident farm labourers, who worked for most of their lives on large farms. In the region south of Bruges, an area with lighter sandy soils, the situation was totally different. Inland Bruges was a region with mostly smallholders and where peasant households were primarily interested in survival. They developed different survival strategies such as the intensive cultivation of the land, as well as a constant search for additional sources of income such as wage labour or production for the market via proto-industrial activities. Indeed, for a large number of households, the linen industry, traditionally an industry with a lot of female employment, provided an additional but essential income to the household budget. This suggests, in fact, that in this area there were more opportunities for women to remain single, while in the Polders this would have been more difficult. Moreover, occupational opportunities even declined significantly during the 18th century in the Polders – as they did in all rural areas of Northwestern Europe. From the end of the century, employment in the cottage industry decreased as well.

In order to study the coping strategies of unmarried women in these two areas, I use the censuses of 1748 and of 1814/15, supplemented with a probate inventory, tax lists and poor relief lists. I collected the data for all unmarried women for whom I assumed that they had a (strong) chance to remain single. Since the average female age at marriage at that time was about 27 years (mean of both periods) (Devos, 1999), we can assume that a considerable portion of the women of 30 years and older would never marry. The total women observed for both areas above age 30 amounts to 228 in 1748 and 2690

in 1814 (see figure 2[4]). S. Watkins states in her introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Family History* on spinsterhood (1984) that if historians are interested in the way unmarried women constructed their lives in the early modern period, it is preferable to consider unmarried women from the age of 30-35 as a focus of research. This was the age at which women who were not yet married had to develop other subsistence strategies.[5] According to the census of 1814 20,8% of all women above the age of 30 in inland Bruges were single as compared to 13.6% in the polder region.

Figure 2. Number of single women above age 30 in the Franc of Bruges according to the census of 1748 and 1814[6]

	1748		**1814/15**	
	Sandy	**Polder**	**Sandy**	**Polder**
Number of unmarried women	124	104	1445	1245

3. The subsistence strategies of unmarried women

Around 1810 in the city of Tilburg -in the Northern Netherlands- 85% of all unmarried women above age 18 were working. (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2007: 195) Similar conclusions apply for the region of Bruges: single women formed an essential part of the labour market. In the city of Bruges in 1814, 87.4% of the unmarried women above age 30 were active. The census of 1814 mentions an occupation for 70% of the unmarried women in the inland area, and 72.2% in the polder area.

S. Mendelson and C. Crawford (1998) state that single women in early modern England had different occupations during the course of their life. Women had not only successively another occupation, but 'puzzled' their lives together. (Wales, 1984) Unmarried women in particular relied upon various activities: different occupations and small jobs–which O. Hufton called an *'economy of makeshifts'* (Hufton, 1976)– informal help, help from (extended) kin, official poor relief, criminal networks… In other words, their survival was based on economic opportunities and several kinds of social networks.

In order to explore the strategies of these single women in different social agrosystems, I look in this paper at three variables in particular: the occupation of the women, their residence and migration pattern.[7]

[4] The big difference between the numbers of unmarried women considered in both periods is due to the poor information on birth dates in the census of 1748. Consequently, it was impossible for a large part of the unmarried women to distinguish whether they were older than 30 years old and thus were not included in the analysis.

[5] '*I have chosen age 35 to demarcate the onset of spinsterhood because data on age-specific marriage rates show few first marriages after that age; anyone still single at 35 is likely to remain so. Demographers usually prefer age 50, because they have been interested in marriage primarily as conditioning exposure to the risk of childbearing, and after age 50 that risk is negligible. Historians of the family may well have other interests in marriage than its implications for fertility*.' (Watkins S.C., 1984: 310)

[6] Burghgrave, G/ Dewulf-Heus, Romain L., Volkstellingen 1814/1815, 1976-1989. Cornette J. en Leupe A.,/ Dewulf-Heus (R.L.), Volkstelling 1748. 1977-1989

[7] A more extensive analysis is being prepared with variables on household composition, family composition, household size and wealth.

3.1. Occupation

While the sources used for this paper do not allow us to look at the range of occupations during the course of the lives of the women, they do permit to give us an overview of their professions at one particular moment. The census of 1814/15, however, provide more information than the one of 1748. In both censuses, especially for women living in the parental household, mostly, no occupation was mentioned.

Figure 3 shows the occupations registered for single women in the censuses of 1748 and 1814. Not taking the women without a registered occupation into account, it seems that at both times a large number of single women in the Polders worked as a servant. In 1814, wage labour became more important, another quarter of them worked as a labourer. Compared to 1748, this percentage had increased substantially. This is most likely due to the fact that more young women remained single (and thus did not start an own household), which increased the amount of available labour from which the farmer could select. It meant that he was not forced into long term contracts. B. Hill found for the English case that at that time job security for young unmarried women (and men) in agriculture labour decreased significantly. (Hill, 2001) In the region of Bruges, however, where because of the Napoleontic wars the amount of young male work force had shrunk, female day labourers had become attractive. (Delahaye, 2006) T. Lambrecht states for the Southern Netherlands that by entering the labour market as a day-labourer '*families could ultimately organize their time more productively, had some kind of insurance against setbacks and could access the remains of the harvest of large farmers'*. (2009: 649) In this respect day labour was an opportunity to cope with excess labour power and enlarge the household budget.

Figure 3: Occupation of unmarried women above age 30, 1748 and 1814

Occupation %				
	1748		**1814/15**	
Occupation	**Sandy (n = 114)**	**Polders (n = 76)**	**Sandy (n = 1445)**	**Polders (n = 1245)**
Particulière/living on interest	3,5		3,6	2,7
Former religious women			0,4	
Tradeswoman/artisan		1,3	1,2	1,9
Third sector			0,4	0,3
Female farmer			1,7	3,5
Spinster	26,4	1,3	39,7	16,8
Seamstress/knitter	2,6		1,9	0,7
Domestic Servant	4,4	27,6	13,2	21,3
Labourer/day labourer	8,8	2,6	7,8	24,8
Poor/disabled	10,5	**34,2**	0,3	1
Not mentioned	44,7	32,9	29,7	26,7
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the censuses of 1748 and 1814

In inland Bruges, the situation was quite different. Day labour accounted for only about 8% of all occupations. Here the linen industry seems to have provided work for a lot of unmarried women in 1748 (26.4%) as well as in 1814 (39.7%).

The high percentage of single women involved in the textile industry in inland Bruges is not surprising. Since most households were smallholders, most of them were involved in the cottage industry. The linen industry was in fact highly labour intensive and created work for women within the household

system. The question to be addressed now is, is not how women's work contributed to family economy, but more importantly whether it provided unmarried women opportunities to live on their own and accumulate some income. According to some authors cottage industry gave women an early opportunity for economic independence (Sharpe, 1991). Literature for Tilburg, for instance, suggests that the women were able to establish an own household: in this city 75% of unmarried women who were head of the household worked in the textile industry. (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2007: 311) Nevertheless, according to Van Nederveen Meerkerk a large part of the spinsters, even those living on their own, received formal and informal support. (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2007: 195) At the start of the 19th century in inland Bruges, also more than half (56.1%) of the women who were the head of the household worked as a spinster. (Figure 4) This was the case for example for Isabelle Clara Ampe, born in 1720 in Lichtervelde and died in 1787 in Torhout (inland area).[8] At the time of the census in 1748 she lived together with her parents and at the end of her life, she was head of the household and shared a house with another unmarried woman, called Regina Arnoudt. During her entire life she had worked as a spinster. Her probate inventory reveals that she owned a house with a piece of land, an amount of cash, several long-term bonds and some loans. At the end her belongings exceeded her debts.

Figure 4: Occupation of single women as head of the household, inland area, 1814

Occupation	**Sandy (n=221)**
Particulière/living on interest	10,4
Former religious women	0,9
Tradeswoman/artisan	4,1
Third sector	0,9
Female farmer	2,2
Spinster	56,1
Seamstress/knitter	2,3
Domestic Servant	0,5
Labourer/day labourer	16,7
Poor/disabled	0
Not mentioned	5,9
Total	**100**

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the census of 1814/15

The economic independence of spinsters can also be assessed by looking at poor lists. In 1841, for instance, the government of Lichtervelde made a list of spinners and weavers who had problems to survive.[9] At that time the linen industry had to face the competition of cheap mechanised cotton, and was in a severe crisis. Of the 138 households in Lichtervelde who received aid, 12 households of widows received aid and 'only' 8 households of single women.

The census of 1814 puts these figures into another perspective. It provides us in fact with exceptional information on the wealth of the women. For the head of the households we know for instance whether they owned or rented the house. It appears that in the inland area, only 4.5% of the single women who were head of the household and worked as spinsters, owned real estate. This indicates that spinsters,

[8] RABR, SVG RAB Lichtervelde Oud 2252, Parish registers of Lichtervelde, Registers of baptism, 21-10-1720, Census of 1748

[9] RABR, TBO 61/325, Dossier over het Plaatselijk Comité tot steun aan de behoeftige spinners en wevers 1840-1842

living alone or as head of the household, were most probably in a vulnerable position. R. Vermoesen (2006) in his analysis of proto-industrialisation confirms the precarious situation of most households involved in the linen industry. Using probate inventories, for instance, he found that households without a spinning wheel had a lot more assets than households with one (or more) spinning wheels.

3.2. Residence

A second way of exploring the experiences and coping strategies of single women, can be obtained by looking at their housing situation. With whom did they live? Were they able to establish a household on their own? Did they live with other single women? Or with family?

Figure 5 shows that in 1748 more than quarter were able to establish their own household, in 1814 this percentage had nevertheless shrunk to 15%.[10] Many single women above age 30 lived with their parents or other family members. In the sandy inland region, in 1748 as well as in 1814, more than half of them lived in a household where a close family member was the head. In the polder area the percentages are smaller, but still amount to more than a third of all households. (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Head of the household of single women

Head of the Household %				
	1748		**1814/15**	
Head of the household	**Sandy (n = 114)**	**Polders (n = 76)**	**Sandy (n = 1445)**	**Polders (n = 1245)**
Herself	27,2	26,3	15,2	16,8
Parents	35,1	30,3	29,4	23
Siblings	23,7	5,3	20,4	14,2
Other family			3	1,9
Employer	3,5	26,3	11,6	18,2
Unrelated	10,5	11,8	18,6	23,8
Renter			1,3	1,6
Co-lodger			0,5	0,5
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the censuses of 1748 and 1814.

The fact that in the inland area a lot more single women lived in the household of kin indicates again that these women formed an essential part of the family economy. According to T. Lambrecht, moving away from the household in order to find work was not only a decision the (young) single made, but was also and often only a decision made by and in favour of the whole household. *'The labour market provided an outlet for excess family labour power with multiple effects.'* (Lambrecht 2009: 649) As a consequence, when the family could fulfil the need of labour within the households, singles were not 'forced' to find an occupation outside this household. The evidence is apparent when we look at the

[10] There is a bias in these numbers, namely, part of the women who are considered here as head of the household were reported in the censuses as 'dischgenoot', so they relied on poor relief and part of them would have lived in a household of another parish member. Unfortunately, we could not find out whether they really lived alone or if they lived in another household.

household situation of spinsters in particular. More than half of them lived with close family and especially with parents. (Figure 6)

Figure 6: Household situation of single women working as a spinster, 1814

Relation spinsters – Head of the household in Sandy region 1814/15 % (n = 574)	
Head of the Household	**%**
Herself	21,6
Parent(s)	30,3
Sibling(s)	19,7
Other family	2,9
Not Related	23,2
Renter	1,4
Co-lodger	0,9
Total	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the census of 1814/15.

Figure 5 showed that both censuses did not register an occupation for a large percentage of the single women. According to R.B. Litchfield it can be assumed that these women – if they were living with kin – were also involved in the family economy (Litchfield, 1988: 91). More unmarried women in the sandy region than in the polder region had no occupation mentioned. The major portion of them was living with parents and siblings. (Figure 7) The evidence suggests in this case that these women most likely were also involved in the cottage industry.

Figure 7: Household situation of single women without a registered occupation

Relation women without occupation mentioned and the head of the household %				
	1748		**1814/15**	
	Sandy	**Polders**	**Sandy**	**Polders**
Head of the household	**(n = 51)**	**(n = 25)**	**(n = 425)**	**(n =328)**
Herself	7,8		2,4	3
Parent(s)	45,2	72	48,7	43,3
Sibling(s)	39,2	12	25,6	17,7
Other family			3,8	3,7
Not related	7,8	16	19,5	30,8
Renter			0,7	0,6
Co-Lodger				0,9
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the censuses of 1748 and 1814.

Looking at the household situation for female labourers – next to domestic service, at that time the most common occupation in the Polders – the census of 1814/15 reveals that 27.2% of the single female labourers were head of their household. (Figure 8) 11.9%, in fact, lived by themselves. Does this indicate that single women earned a sufficient income to establish their own household? Female day labourers in fact earned on average only 70% of the wage of their male counterparts. (Lambrecht, 2009: 644). The census of 1748 points indeed in another direction. In the polder area more than one third was registered as poor or disabled as against one in ten in inland Bruges (Table 2) The poor lists of the village of Gistel also indicate that a lot of single women who were living alone needed poor

aid.[11] In other words, it seems that unmarried women who could not rely on family help had to resort to formal relief.

Figure 8: Head of the household of single female (day)labourers, 1814

Relation women working as (day) labourer and head of the household (n = 310)	
Head of the Household	**%**
Herself	27,2
Parent(s)	22
Sibling(s)	11,7
Other family	1,3
Employer	
Not related	33,9
Renter	3,9
Co-lodger	
Total	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the census of 1814/15.

About 35% of unmarried females working as a (day)labourer was living in a household where the head of the family was a close kin member, which suggests again that wage labour was an essential part of family economy strategies. Hill (2001) states that in England during the 18th century unmarried women were increasingly cut off from agricultural work, and as a result, single women from rural labouring classes could not survive on their own earnings. In the Polders only 3.4% of the unmarried women was a farmer. The census of 1814/15 reveals furthermore that only 5.4% of the women in the Polders had real estate (compared to 4.5% in inland Bruges).

3.3. Migration

The literature has revealed the importance of migration as a survival strategy. (Gordon, 2005) The census of 1814/15 provides us with important information on the place of birth and place of residence, and enables us to identify the immigrants among the single women. However, we do not have an indication of the timing of the event. A woman could have moved during childhood with her parents, or at a later stage in her life to find work.

Figure 9 reveals that in the polder area, about 44% of the single women were living in another place than their place of birth. Inland Bruges and the city of Bruges were much less attractive areas. In Bruges, in fact, only 16% of the single women were immigrants. The availability of employment (service and textile industries such lace-making) and poor relief seems not to have operated as a pull factor.

Figure 9: Immigrant single women, 1814

Mobility unmarried women 1814/15 %	
Sandy (n = 397)	27,5
Polders (n = 556)	44,6
City (n = 466)	16,6

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the census of 1814/15.

[11] RABR, TBO 54, nr. 123, Register der dischgenoten Gistel

If we take a closer look at the origin of immigrant women in the countryside, it appears however that most of them were born within the area: two out of three immigrants were born in the Polders, and one in two in inland Bruges (Figure 10). Women from the inland area were indeed not forced to look for work in another area. Only 11% of the migrants in Bruges or the Polders were born in the sandy region. Most likely, the cottage industry provided single women with sufficient occupational opportunities.

Figure 10: Origin of immigrant women, 1814

Origin of immigrant women (1814/15) %			
	Place of residence		
Origin	Sandy (n = 397)	Polder (n = 556)	City (n = 466)
Sandy	49,7	11,5	11,6
Polder	12,6	65,6	31,8
Outside	37,7	22,9	56,6
Total	100	100	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the census of 1814/15.

Figure 11: Occupation of immigrant women, 1814/15

Occupation of immigrant women 1814/15 %		
Occupation	**Sandy (n=397)**	**Polder (n=555)**
Particular/living on interest	3,7	2,9
Former religious women	1,5	
Tradeswoman/artisan	0,3	2,2
Third sector	1	0,4
Female farmer	0,5	1,8
Spinster	**35,3**	15,3
Seamstress/knitter	1	0,9
Domestic Servant	22,7	32,4
Labourer/day labourer	8,3	23,6
Poor/disabled		0,9
Not mentioned	25,7	19,6
Total	100	100

Source: author's calculation on the basis of the census of 1814/15.

If we try to identify these immigrants even further by looking at their occupation, it appears that although female migrants are generally associated with service (Litchfield, 1988) – a lot of the women in the Franc of Bruges (Figure 11) worked as spinsters or as day labourers. In other words, excess labour power was able to find work outside the household in the form of domestic service, day labour

or spinning. Of all single women who did not live in their birthplace in the polder region in 1814/15, 32.4% was working as a domestic servant, 23.6% as a (day) labourer. In the sandy region, they also found an occupation in the cottage textile industry.

Conclusions

This paper deals with the coping strategies of unmarried women in two rural areas of the Franc of Bruges. While previous research on women's work took marital status as a distinctive category, my study makes clear that even within the same marital category economic and social opportunities could differ substantially. The two sub-areas generated different strategies for survival of single women.

In inland Bruges, there were more unmarried women above the age of 30: one in five of all women was single compared to one in seven in the polder area. This was most probably due to the occupational opportunities for single women within the family economy of the inland area. The women stayed in their parish, mainly in a household of close kin and were not forced to immigrate to the city or the polder region in search for work. The cottage textile industry provided them with sufficient employment opportunities. Most of the women who lived on their own, worked as spinsters. Some spinsters, however, needed additional help, while others could accumulate property and live a more than descent life. Marie Anne Denolf, for instance, owned a piece of land where she lived together with another unmarried woman. She had to spin to make a living. Barbe Bouckaert on the other hand had some land in property that she rented to four farmers. At the census of 1814 she lived on her own and on her interest.[12] At the same time, for unmarried females from outside, the sandy region was not an attractive area.

In the polder region, more unmarried females were forced to move out of their birth parish. Only half of the unmarried women above age 30 were living in their place of birth, and some of them moved to the city. The majority, however, moved within the polder region in order to find work. As in other regions, most of these immigrant women worked as domestic servants. Native born unmarried women also worked as domestic servants, but most of them were (day) labourers. As has been shown, both domestic service and (day) labour were mechanisms to cope with excess labour power within the family and were an essential part of family economy strategies. As a result, unmarried women working as (day)labourers lived in many cases with close kin. Labouring unmarried women who could not rely on kin members had, more than in the inland areas, to resort to poor relief, which suggests a stronger polarization between rich and poor in the Polders.

In order to depict the subsistence strategies of unmarried women, it is clear that more research is needed. For instance, further analyses should include detailed information on household composition, size of the household, family composition, influence of the life courses of parents and siblings… Furthermore, it is not sufficient to limit the analyses to single women. The exercise becomes more meaningful if we compare their experiences with those of other women without a husband, namely, widows.

[12] RABR, TBO 61/322 Rol grondbelasting jaar 9 Lichtervelde, Burghgrave, G., Volkstellingen 1814, 31: Torhout, Lichtervelde, Brugge, 1996

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